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West German firm said helping Iraq to build nerve gas factory

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Karl Kolv Ltd., a West German engineering firm, has helped Iraq establish its own factory about 20 miles north of Baghdad for the production of a particularly lethal kind of nerve gas called "Tabun," a senior U.S. intelligence official said yesterday.

"Iraq claims it is a pesticide plant but it's not," the official said, "And the West Germans know it's not." This would represent the first time Iraq, which is alleged to have used chemical weapons in its war with Iran, has developed the capacity for producing the lethal weapons itself.

"They [The Iraqis] are basically fearful of waves of human masses and they don't have nuclear weapons," the official said.

A State Department source who agreed to talk about the intelligence information on condition that he would not be identified said that the

government of West Germany, a U.S. ally, took Karl Kolv Ltd. to court but the case was dismissed on a technicality.

"Officially they are going after it [Karl Kolv] but I can't say how wholeheartedly," the official said. He explained that the German company has basically served as consulting engineer in a multimillion dollar "turnkey" project to enable Seep, the official Iraqi agency for pesticides, to produce the nerve gas.

Seep "is only the cover," the source explained. He said photographs have been taken of the building and evidence of the initial production of two cases — "Tabun" and "Sarin," a mustard gas — is in the possession of the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad.

Iraq resumed diplomatic relations with the United States last year after an 18-year lapse. But U.S.-Iraqi ties have been strained recently by the reported harboring in Baghdad of Abu Abbas, the Palestinian who

allegedly masterminded the hijacking of the Achille Lauro.

According to the official, Iraq so far has used the crippling nerve gas vapors only "for defensive purposes," that is, to slow down advancing Iranian troops long enough to escape and reorganize company battalions. "They use them to make a cloud that nobody can pass through for three or four days," the official said.

But there is widespread concern here that Iraq will use the chemical weapon directly against Iranian troops if the regime of Ayatollah Khomeini launches its long-expected invasion to cut the Basra-to-Baghdad highway in early March. That could lead to a dramatic escalation of the Iran-Iraq war, he added.

Syria, Iran's chief military supplier, is understood to have already approached another West German concern to acquire the technical know-how for Iran to manufacture its own chemical weapons.